The Russian Revolution: What if it never happened?

By

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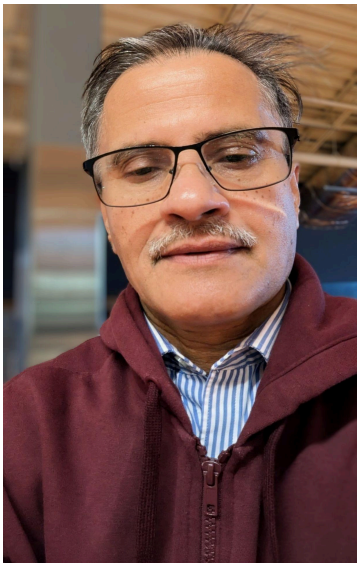

Indrajit Roy is an agricultural scientist with expertise in rural development and socio-economic empowerment. He was born in Mohanganj, Netrokona district, in 1956. He completed his secondary education from Mohanganj Pilot High School in 1972 and his higher secondary education from Government Anandamohan College, Mymensingh in 1974. In 1976, he went to the then Soviet Union for higher education on a scholarship provided by the Soviet government. He studied at the Kuban State Agrarian University in Krasnodar, now the Russian Federation. He received a Master's degree in Agricultural Science in 1982 and a Ph D in Plant Breeding and Seed Production in 1986. After returning home in 1986, he joined the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council and worked there as the Chief Scientific Officer until March 2001. He received training on project analysis from the United States Department of Agriculture in 1992. In 1999, he did post-doctoral research at the Department of Plant Breeding at Kyushu University in Fukuoka, Japan. He has been living permanently in Toronto, Canada since 2001. He is working as an international consultant on agricultural research and rural development at various international organizations, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. In his personal life, he is married and has two sons.

Introduction

The question we have posed isn't a real one. Its purpose is to take the readers into a world of imagination where they can ask questions from a variety of angles, including questions that are considered taboo. Its purpose isn't to give judgment on the outcomes as to what would have been better or what turned out to be worse. It is simply to just look impassionately at the past, apply your own judgement and make one's own decisions. Hardly anyone would dispute that the Russian revolution and the Soviet Union, the state born out of it, were both most significant pivotal events of the past century. Because they have altered the course of human history and touched the lives of millions of people around the world on a scale that not a single political event could do. The world in its absence would have been a very different place from what it is now.

We have written extensively before about the success story that the Russian Revolution created both at home and around the world. For example, how rapidly the Soviet state lifted millions of its people from poverty and illiteracy; quickly industrialized the country, opened new frontiers in knowledge and technology and elevated the country to a level lagging not too far from other developed industrialized countries. When the Second World War broke out, it took the brunt of Nazi invasion. It was also the key force of the global coalition that defeated Germany in 1945. It emerged as a superpower at the end of that war. The revolution not only changed Russia's course of development, but also influenced how leftist political movements evolved in many countries of the world, for example, in the United States. In 1932, William Z. Foster, who was a Communist Party USA's candidate in the US presidential election uttered these words:

"The Soviet Union, the crystallization of the Communist program in life, and the shock-brigade of the world proletariat, rising and flourishing with its great revolutionary strength in the midst of a decaying, declining capitalist system, is the hope and guarantee of a new life for the starved and exploited of the earth." They appeared in the book, *Toward Soviet America*—a title which encapsulated not just the CPUSA's election platform but its vision of the future socialist society to which it expected to lead American workers[1]. Such a bold statement particularly imagining the US through the lens of the Soviet Union shows the influence the CPUSA exerted on America's labour movement at that time.

Not only in the US, the Russian revolution in those days inspired working people in Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain to organize under the banner of the Communist Party. However, revolutionary enthusiasm that the world working class tied to the Soviet Union gradually faded away as world capitalism recovered from the decline of the 1930s and at the end of WWII found a way to become more productive, innovative and prepared to accommodate reasonable concerns of the working class avoiding the worst forms of exploitation. The Soviet Union's demise was a shocking, heart-breaking moment for

[1] C.J. Atkins. The Soviet past we never knew.
https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/the-soviet-past-we-never-knew/ November 6, 2017

those who believed in humanity's transition to a classless equal society. But it was also a moment of jubilation for the sceptics who always considered this idea as a utopia because in failure the Soviet Union validated it once again.

But caught in between, it was a terrible moment for the Soviet people. It was particularly cataclysmic for the Russian people who had to bear the key burden of the cost of fundamental transformation of the society and make enormous sacrifices in the process. For them, the failure was also a moment of introspection of whether the Revolution was a worthy cause despite the Soviet Union's impressive record of achievements. In failure, no great undertaking is above a critical review. Many simply wondered whether the enormous cost and sacrifices invested in the socialist transformation of the society justified the results. Was it worthwhile to invest in a cause that failed to stand the test of time, only to reverse the journey back to capitalism seventy years later? Following in this vein, let's examine what the costs were. Our main focus will be on the loss of the population.

The cost of the revolution

Estimates of the total loss of the population during the civil war (1918 – 1922) vary widely between 10.3 million and 12.0 million. It includes death of military personnel and civilian populations in combat; death due to epidemic diseases, hunger, terror, etc. It also includes people who chose to emigrate because of the revolution and the civil war[2]. The campaign of rural transformation based on forced collectivization of agriculture and elimination of large landholders (Kulaks) as a farming class (1928–1935) claimed an estimated 10 million lives. It includes death of more than 5 million people due to hunger and food shortages as a result of the breakdown of traditional peasant farming; more than 2 million of large landholders died as a result of forced eviction from their land, exile to Siberia and other less inhabited parts of the country[3]. Then came the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), the Second World War fought by the Soviet people, in which 27 million people sacrificed their lives. We assume that had there been no Russian revolution, there wouldn't be any Soviet Union for the Nazi Germany to target and destroy. So, we have included deaths during this war in the total loss of the population attributable to the revolution. Therefore, until 1991 the total estimated loss of the population due to factors that have their origin in the October Revolution stood at 49 million. In one study, this number was estimated at 50 to 60 million.[4] When the Soviet Union fell apart, a chaotic reverse journey to capitalism began undoing the gains of seventy years of collective socialist reconstruction. The process was marked by social unrest, localized armed conflicts, and outright civil wars.

These were almost similar in their nature to those that occurred in the aftermath of the October Revolution. Many people died as these processes unfolded and spread throughout the country. One estimate puts the number of deaths at 32 million over 1991-2010 that could be attributed to various

[2] Какими были потери в Гражданской войне?, https://dzen.ru/a/YukKFcvzSTIDldEx, 2 августа 2022

[3] Коллективизация в СССР: зачем раскулачивали крестьян и сколько было жертв, https://dzen.ru/a/YXgde71hwiuaYZxg, 5 декабря 2021

[4] Гунар Кононов, Итоговое количество жертв 1917-1991 годы СССР, https://stihi.ru/2025/04/27/5714

factors rooted in the Soviet Union's disintegration and its chaotic aftermath [5]. If we add the number of deaths from 1918 to 2010, the total loss of the population stands at 81 million. But the story doesn't end here. Because of the issues rooted in how the Ukrainian SSR was formed as a constituent of the USSR, the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet period faced the grim reality of having to intervene militarily into the neighbouring country since 2014. It was needed to protect the security and dignity of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine following the overthrow of its elected government in a coup and seizure of power by Ukrainian nationalists . In 2022, the low-intensity war turned into full-fledged war when Russia launched its Special Military Operation in Ukraine. Now into its third year, this war has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives of Russians as well as Ukrainians.

Despite peacemaking efforts at various levels, it is still a great unknown when this war will end and how many more lives will be lost before the war ends. If we add the presumptive losses of lives in this war to the past toll of 81 million, the figure will be closely approaching 85 million. Such a huge loss mainly of the male population in the backdrop of falling birth rate has created a demographic crisis threatening survival of Russian people as an ethnic entity. Now we confront a situation where on one side we see the Bolshevik Revolution brought tremendous achievements and glory to Russia in a short period which otherwise wouldn't have been possible in a business-as-usual scenario, but on the other side the same revolution destroyed historical Russia and clouded the prospects of Russians thriving as an ethnic entity.

What if the Bolshevik Revolution didn't happen

Let's imagine the Bolshevik Revolution didn't happen. Instead, the Provisional Government that came to power following abdication of the throne by the last emperor Nicolai II had a chance to continue till the convocation of the Constituent Assembly. Would it have been bad for the Russian people? Would it have been a missed chance for Russia's working class and peasants to improve their lot? Providing an unambiguous answer to these questions is difficult. But we can imagine possible trade-offs. Without the revolution, a Government elected through free and fair election would have pursued a social-democratic path of incremental development. All the main parties – the Social Revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks, and the Constitutional-democrats – had mostly social-democratic platforms differing on the extent of the state's role in the economy and the approach to private ownership of the means of production. The future development could have been based on reforms of state institutions and prudent socio-economic policies but keeping private ownership of the means of production intact and avoiding drastic shake-up of the society the way the Bolsheviks did.

Obviously, the results would have been slow, less impressive, but sustainable in the long term. It would have the benefit of building on continuity rather than going through a long process of disruptive social upheaval before delivering rapid changes sought through the revolution. For example, on many economic indicators, the USSR reached the level of the Russian Empire as of 1913 sixteen years later in

[5] Демографические потери с 1991 г. по 2010 г, https://red-army-1917.livejournal.com/23076.html

1929[6]. For the agriculture sector, it took much longer to catch up to the level of the Russian empire. Total grain production in the USSR reached the level of 1913 only in 1937[7]. Elimination of large farm holdings and collectivization of agriculture might have served broad goals of equalization of the society and socialist reconstruction. It gave the government a firm hold on the food supply chain and transfer of resources generated in the agriculture sector to fund rapid industrialization, infrastructure and social services development. But on the efficiency of agricultural production, it was a mistake. Imperial Russia was a net exporter of foodgrains, but grain production in the USSR was barely enough to meet the domestic demand. Beginning in the 1960s, the Soviet Union turned into a net importer of large quantities of foodgrain.

The Second World War without a Soviet Union

Would there have been a Second World War had there been no Soviet Union? If yes, could Imperial Russia defeat Nazi Germany? If the Russian Revolution didn't happen, Imperial Russia most likely would have continued its participation in the First World War against Germany along with its main allies Great Britain and France. The US joined the war in support of the alliance in April 1917 which bolstered its capacity to continue the war. The war might have ended with a more favourable outcome for Russia with likely territorial gains than having to conclude a separate humiliating peace deal with Germany which the Bolsheviks did. But it won't have affected the overall political and economic context in post-war Germany that helped the rise of Nazis. So, the likelihood that Second World War would occur was almost certain. But it would have been different particularly with respect to Russia than it was to the Soviet Union. Because its Marxist ideology made it a particular target from the Nazis as well as from other major powers who wouldn't have objected if the Nazis could do the tricky job of destroying the Soviet Union.

However, the outcome of the war would most likely be devastating if it were the Russian empire to face the German onslaught instead of the Soviet Union. The empire lagged behind Germany in industrial development so far that it could hardly match the number of arms, ammunition, and other military hardware that Germany's war industry produced by the time the war began. Despite suffering colossal losses and initial setbacks in the war, the Soviet Union rebounded and finally defeated Germany. It happened because of the industrial capacity it created through socialist industrialization and a societal order based on collectivism and a strong discipline under a strict top-down political control. The opposite would have been the case if it were the Russian Empire. Unlike the Soviet Union, it could hardly rebound from the initial losses and strike back to recover the lost territories. In that calamitous period for humanity, the Soviet Union not only saved Russia but also the world from the dominance of the Nazis. Because whether the allies could defeat Germany without the Soviet Union was open to question.

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[6] История России и СССР https://vk.com/wall-162586006_513299?w=wall-162586006_513299
[7] Коротко о сельском хозяйстве Российской Империи и СССР, https://historical-fact.livejournal.com/185742.html

How could the world order in the post-Second World War era be different without the existence of the Soviet Union ? Had Nazi Germany won the war, the world would have changed unbelievably for the worse. Even if it could avoid outright surrender and manage a negotiated exit from the war through a face-saving peace deal, it could still retain some capabilities to help it bounce back at some point in future. In that hypothetical scenario, Russia, as a member of the victorious allied coalition, might have got back its lost territories. But it wouldn't have emerged from the war the way the Soviet Union did. It not only recovered its occupied territories but also annexed new territories and extended its footprint in Central and Eastern Europe through installing in power friendly communist party-led regimes in a number of countries. It became a superpower leading a socialist camp. The world became divided into two power centres, also known as bipolar, one led by the US and the other by the Soviet Union. It also became more dangerous than before because of the onset of a new Cold War. The Cold War was the name given to the US-led global efforts to roll back the Soviet Union's influence, protect Western liberal democracies from encroachment of communism. It was done by building military and political alliances across continents and deploying an array of global economic and financial institutions and other approaches. The goal was to counter the Soviet Union's soft power derived from its Marxist ideology to influence public opinion and political developments in the post-colonial developing world.

Post- Second World War era without a Soviet Union

Without the existence of the Soviet Union, the post-WWII world order might have been entirely different. It might have been more complex with new realignment of power centres, emergence of regional powers but the United States retaining the single dominant superpower status. It would have been less divisive because there won't be a cold war. There wouldn't have been a race for development of the atomic bomb and other destructive weapons systems. Scientific exploration of space might have proceeded at a normal pace with no hurry to become the first in reaching certain goals for the benefit of humanity. There might not have been a global communist movement and national liberation movements receiving support from external sources. Marxist socialist ideology would still spread throughout the world, but that would have been based on local efforts and specific to local circumstances. Oppressed peoples in colonial countries would have still risen up and fought for emancipation from colonial exploitation and independence. But its dynamics would be different. It might have proceeded at a slower pace than it did when those struggles were framed as national liberation movements.

There wouldn't have been a communist China, Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba. Afghanistan might have continued to remain as a stable, peaceful country growing at its own pace without intervention from outside. The rise of fundamentalist religious forces like the Taliban might not have happened. Many bloody regional wars and conflicts like the Korean war, Vietnam war, and Afghan war wouldn't have happened in absence of superpower competition to gain the upper hand in these regions.

Likelihood of communist revolutions without a Soviet Union

If the Russian revolution hadn't happened in 1917, was there any chance for a communist revolution to happen elsewhere at some point in future? For example, in developed industrialized countries of

Europe, such as Great Britain, France, Germany. In these countries, there was a strong presence of the manufacturing working class unlike in Russia with its mostly agrarian underdeveloped economy where preconditions for a Marxist revolution were less than ideal. The last paragraph of The Manifesto of the Communist Party hinted at how communist revolutions could happen. It says “The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.” The Manifesto ends with a clarion call : Proletarians of all countries, unite. It is evident Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels foresaw the revolution as a collective action of working classes across multiple counties rather than limited to a single country. It should have happened like a domino. The obvious risk of a communist revolution isolatedly in a single country was that it would encourage global bourgeois to unite to contain and finally defeat the revolution. It was exactly what happened with the Soviet Union seventy years later.

Many believe the way the Bolsheviks carried out socialist revolution in Russia and proceeded to build socialism resorting to widespread use of brutal force, killing and violence nullified the prospects of socialist revolutions elsewhere in developed industrialized countries. Without a communist revolution in Russia and its emergence as the global centre for spreading revolutions, there could still be many labour protests, strikes, armed uprisings of working peoples throughout the world. But those struggles would have been tailored to local specific circumstances without being juxtaposed in a globalist framework of world proletarian revolutions. But could those movements lead to overthrow of the ruling bourgeois classes in the way it was done in Russia? While theoretically such a possibility can’t be ruled out, in reality it was more likely not to happen than to happen.

Although no communist revolutions happened in the wake of the Russian revolution, a different kind of revolution happened much later in the early 1960s. Named the “Green Revolution (GR)”, its relevance to discussion about the “Russian Revolution” lies in the ultimate ideological goal, the GR was tasked to achieve. It was to contain the spread of the ideals of the Russian revolution in the developing world with prevalence of massive poverty, food shortages, and undernutrition – conditions that were ripe for organizing the masses to rise up for a revolution. In short, the “Green Revolution” was a strategy of the US-led Western alliance to counter the “Red Revolution”. But it wasn’t articulated as such, rather it was framed in a noble, humanist narrative of supporting rapid increases of food production in developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and ridding the developing world of the threats of famines and perennial food shortages. The idea was simple. If the poor had enough to eat and also access to incomes, there would be less incentive for them to be recruited into grassroots activists for spreading the message of socialist revolution in the countryside.

The Green revolution, as a strategic tool to counter communism, was conceived by two American philanthropic organizations – Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation supported by the US Government's Agency for International Development (USAID). Well-known American plant scientist Norman Borlaug who had been working in Mexico since the 1950s to develop high-yielding (HYVs) varieties of wheat suitable for warmer climates was chosen to lead the revolution. In Asia, an international centre for rice research, well known as IRRI, was established in the Philippines in 1960 to

develop high-yielding varieties of rice. Beginning in the 1960s, HYVs of rice and wheat started spreading in farmers'fields in Mexico, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and other developing countries with support provided by governments of these countries. Widespread cultivation of these HYVs indeed led to rapid increase of food production and warded off the imminent threat of famines and perennial food shortages.

But the GR changed traditional agriculture beyond recognition. To produce expected high yields, the HYVs required high doses of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and irrigation with water drawn primarily from underground sources. Heavy use of chemical inputs as well as groundwater produced wide-ranging negative environmental impacts. Diversity in cropping was replaced by monocropping. Thousands of indigenous crop varieties became extinct from crop fields due to non-use by farmers. These were replaced by a handful of HYVs. Recognizing these drawbacks, the GR was formally declared over toward the end of the 1990s. In its place, a new approach called “sustainable agriculture” was launched which sought to reverse the damages done to peasant farming and restore many aspects of traditional farming which were lost as a result of the Green Revolution. However, the damages inflicted by the Green Revolution on peasant farming and the natural environment were mostly irreversible. Our discussion about the Green Revolution in the context of the Russian Revolution ends with concluding that the former would not have happened had the latter not happened.

Conclusion

We have discussed both sides of the Russian Revolution. We provided an estimate of the losses, past and ongoing. While the gains were impressive, they couldn’t be sustained. The twentieth century world would be a very different place from what it was had there been no Soviet Union. But to assert that it could be more peaceful, prosperous, and orderly without a Soviet Union seems too simplistic. The twenty-first century world that took shape without a Soviet Union in which wars, violence, inter-ethnic conflicts, breakdown in internationally accepted norms and practices in inter-state relations dominate doesn’t support that view.